

# ***Yesterday and Today***

***Stories by Bronia Maringer***

**NARRATED BY CHARLIE BERMANT**



## **A Dedication to Craft**

Books, once perceived at masterful artistic statements, have evolved into something akin to a change purse: A potholder or a quilt, a small craft item to be enjoyed like a locally made scarf or leather bag you find on a tourist trip. These small, unique items earn a place on your shelf or in your heart as you share them with visitors to your home. So an author, once equivalent to a recording artist or a film director, is now comparable to a local retiree who sells beaded purses and needlepoint at a downtown craft booth.

With this in mind, this limited publication is dedicated to my sister, Julie Bermant, who several years ago made us wonderful quilted wall hangings (one of the patterns is part of the cover here). This isn't a competition, but it's rewarding to provide her with something that's essentially handmade.



### *Charlie Explains Who, What and Why*

This is a work in progress, a sketchy draft of the full story of Bronia Maringer, her journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and her impact on her family—many of whom apparently have a genetic disposition to write stuff down. This isn't the whole story, but will have to do for now.

Bronia Lehrer Maringer, “Nanny,” lived from July 2, 1898 to December 23, 1987. Born in Krakow, Poland she moved to Antwerp, Belgium as a teenager to help an aunt. She married Isak Maringer and raised two daughters, Stella and Liliane.

World War II and the accompanying Nazi invasion of Belgium occurred when the girls were teenagers. After an unsuccessful escape in 1941 the family—accompanied by Isak's father—were returned to Antwerp. A second escape was successful, up to a point. The family was unable to secure visas to the United States, the Promised Land, and settled temporarily in Cuba. Stella was out of school by then. Lili finished her secondary education in Cuba, although in a different school than the native kids.

The family finally gained a visa for New York, settling in Manhattan along with several members of their displaced family. It was bittersweet for Nanny. While she soon embraced New York, she had lost several siblings and other family members to the Nazis. She lamented these losses for the rest of her days, reminding those around her of the atrocities while stressing that it can never happen again.

Isak died of cancer in 1950, keeping it together just long enough to walk Lili down the aisle. Nanny had never worked outside the home, but was at Isak's side as he conducted his business as a diamond broker both in Antwerp and New York. She took over his accounts and built her own business, one of the few women brokers working in the diamond district in the 1950s. In the New York bustle, no one guessed that the small well-dressed woman moving along the streets of Manhattan carried a substantial amount of uncut diamonds in her handbag.

She was sidelined by about of uterine cancer in her mid 70s, recovering with surprising resilience. She continued to work sporadically until 1980. By then, she'd taken to writing the down actual and apocryphal stories of her life; many centered around Nazi injustice and its cruelty. She did not tackle the political issues, rather the stories explained the brutality's impact on her extended family.

Nanny's writing career lasted around ten years, from the mid 1970s until her death in 1987. She wrote about 100 stories, of varying length and quality. She started slowly and privately but soon showed them to friends and relatives who encouraged her. The stories occupied her time and attention and provided a way to preserve family history before it was forgotten.

The family encouraged and supported her writing. For a while these pats on the head were enough, but it became clear the stories deserved wider recognition. As they developed and took shape the family encouraged her efforts and published (essentially Xeroxed) three volumes of her stories that were distributed to friends and family.

At the time I was beginning a journalism career, encouraging her writing and providing minor edits. She lamented her poor use of English and inability to express herself in her adopted language. I felt her European usage was part of the charm and told her so.

After three volumes and countless stories Nanny had reached an impasse. She began to repeat herself and the later stories lacked the impact and novelty of her first efforts. Her health again declined and her writing slowed down. It had gone as far as it could go. She had done her part and it was time for others to carry on.

We told her it did not matter if the facts were absolute as long as the feeling remained intact. These stories were parables about Jewish life and her memories of injustice. It all came back to the Nazis, their brutal mistreatment of the Jews and that it cannot ever happen again. She hoped that hammering on this theme would somehow prevent a recurrence. She wasn't sure about the rest of the world, but wanted to make sure her own family would never forget. She was already disappointed in her children and grandchildren, whose devotion to the Jewish faith had lessened in each generation. She had presumably forgotten that she was a bit of a rebel in her youth, and was less religious than her parents.

Diluting the rituals was one thing. Diluting your past was quite another.

On December 23, 1987 I was living in California when my mother called. "Nanny didn't make it," she said without preamble. A routine operation went awry. My sister Julie, a nurse, determined that a level of medical incompetence led to the death, but it would take too much energy make an issue.

Nanny faced down cancer and the Nazis, only to meet her end at the hands of a doctor who didn't get enough sleep the night before.

The family, who had faced the possibility of her demise several times, now accepted the inevitable.

She was unique, as an on-the-ground witness to some of the century's most tragic moments. She fell into line with millions of people before and since; those who made little impact on the world as a whole while becoming a tremendous, inspiring force for those of us in her orbit.

After reading a story Nanny would always say the same thing. "I am writing so that my children will know of this, and that it can never happen again." I understood what she said but wasn't all in. Of course it will never happen again. Even the Germans are remorseful, and the world has learned its lesson.

But Nanny's writings, along with the dozens of self published accounts that come up from an Amazon search of "Holocaust Memoir, have a new edge. The current political unrest includes the winds of racism, fascism and refugee panic, which we assumed were of the past.

We live in a discouraging world, where individuals struggle to find a meaningful place. We can't be heard above the din of hate and confusion. So there is only one solution for many of us: Write it down, hoping that someone will find it in a drawer, in the future.



*Nanny (second from left) and Her Sisters. Resia (far left) also escaped to New York, the others did not. (photo courtesy Amy Trakinski)*

## ***Nanny Writes to Remember***

*Nanny's first stories attempted to explain what prompted her to write, setting the stage for her recollections.*

### **The Golden Thread**

One summer the Angel of Death knocked at my door and I heard his whisper: "It is time to go."

But I was not ready.

I asked the Angel if he had the authority to let me stay a little while longer in this world, because of a holy duty I had to perform, to hand over the golden thread of tradition to the next generations. I was the last one of the tribe that had perished in the plague of this century - the Holocaust.

Why did I neglect that holy mission all my life? Perhaps it was because we lived in the days where they told you not to impose your will and your beliefs on other human beings, even when they were your own grandchildren. Some of the current books said that a child is an island - an entity in the sea of the clan, of the tribe - "Do not!" The "no" was often directed at the parents and grandparents. And if you wanted to talk to children about their origins and duties they would not listen. No one listened to ancient tales in our modern times. Perhaps in another culture, an "abuela" would be able to reach her offspring and not be accused of meddling in other people's lives.

And then one day when I was looking at a piece of white paper I heard a voice saying: "Write!" and I knew that the paper would be patient and would receive my thoughts.

I started to write down stories about what happened a long time ago, about our family, and other people's families, and about the tragic destiny of a generation. Now my children and grandchildren would know why I was not ready to leave this world before I told them who they were. I was the torchbearer and had not handed the torch to them as yet. I was not afraid to die, but I was afraid to face my ancestors and to have to respond to their question: Where were you when the children were growing up, and did not know that they also have to stand up and be counted that their ancestors were holding the Book of the Commandments for generations in their hands and did not betray their past, although they were persecuted?"

With my humble writing I leave to them a legacy. When the angel knocks again, even if it should be tomorrow, I shall be ready and unafraid.



## **His Name Was Lolek**

What a strange name for a Jewish boy. It was given to him by his wet-nurse as a pet name, and it was adopted by his family.

He was a delightful child, with blue eyes and golden hair. When he was three years old, they cut his golden curls, and sent him to cheder. Every morning he would come to his grandmother's room to tie her shoelaces, as she was old and crippled and could not bend to do it herself.

Lolek looked like an Aryan and his Polish was perfect, without any accent. In the Yeshiva, where he went as a teenager, Lolek was the most intelligent of the group of aspiring scholars. He was very often engaged in learned discussion with the Rebbe, who was aware of the alert mind of his young pupil.

Then came the war. Hitler's Nazis started to clean out the town and the shtetls where Jews were living. The Rebbe and the boys found a hiding place in a hut hidden by 35 dense pine trees, where they felt safe. Their only link with the dangerous world outside was the caretaker of an abandoned manor, who provided them with food.

Their lives did not change, except that they were very often hungry. Every day they discussed the complicated problems of the Talmud with the Rebbe. They were reassured by him that the almighty would save them from evil, an evil which would not be able to destroy the Jewish people. As it had not in ancient times, when the books they were studying were written.

One day, Lolek's father came from the big city and asked his son to join him and the family in an escape from the Nazi terror. Peasants and guards would be bribed to smuggle them to Hungary. But Lolek refused to leave.

"The Rebbe is old and helpless," he told his father. He and two of his friends decided to stay with their old teacher to protect him from danger.

His father was not able to change Lolek's mind. He left with tears in his eyes, praying to God to save his son from disaster.

On one winter night, a stranger in peasant garb knocked on the window of the Rebbe's room. Lolek, who slept nearby, was alerted and asked the man what he wanted from the old Rebbe at this late hour.

"I have to talk to him. It's very important," said the man in a whisper.

After one hour spent with the Rebbe, the stranger left. The following morning the Rebbe explained to Lolek the stranger's request, to save as many Jewish children from the ghetto as possible and smuggle them to Israel. The stranger was a member of the Haganah. Their bold task was extremely dangerous, the Rebbe said, but it had to be done.

The Rebbe told Lolek that with his Aryan looks and unaccented speech he would be an asset to the movement. He would serve a holy mission, to save Jewish children and with them, their Jewish heritage, for the future of the land of Israel.

"Perhaps this was the Almighty's plan. Once more to save the Jewish people in this way, instead of sending the Messiah," he said. "Who knows or understands God's ways?"

Lolek had promised to save at least one hundred children before he would try to save himself.

His papers with his new gentile name were brought to him. He would join the railroad, where he would be hired as a helping hand on the trains, riding mostly at night. He was to wait on a special platform, as he was ordered, and then he would be handed a little bundle - a child - which he would hide in his sleeping niche. The child would be recovered by members of the underground.

This happened about a hundred times. One night when a child was brought to him and he was in the act of hiding it, a hysterical woman came running - the same woman who, for days, had been begging the people who were in contact with the ghetto to save her child.

"Give me back my baby," she yelled. "The Jew stole my child!" Immediately, the station was surrounded by soldiers.

Many members of the underground who were helping the Haganah were in danger of being identified and discovered. Lolek refused to give information and was shot on the spot by a German official.

Lolek was my nephew, the son of my beloved brother. He was twenty years old. His Hebrew name, given him at birth, was Joseph Leib ben Israel Meir, and it is memorialized in the Shrine of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as that of a Jewish hero. His Father, Israel Meir ben Menachem, died in Bergen Belsen.

## **Yesterday and Today**

The other day somebody discovered my latent talent for writing and advised me to join a workshop for creative writing. I

delayed the decision to do it, knowing of my shortcomings in the English language.

The next night I had a dream. A nightmare. I dreamt of my dear ones - lost forever. A multitude of shadows with extended hands touching me, turned around me like in a carousel, the same faces coming back again and again, talking in a whisper: write about me - do not let them forget that I died too young - and me - and me - they whispered. One of them pressed a green pen in my hand and said: give me back my life - write about me - and me - and me - all talked together like in a Greek Chorus - never again, never - never --

I woke up trembling and in tears. Across the room, on my desk was the green pen I had bought a day before.

I started to write stories about them. It was painful and depressing. But I was told in my dream not to forget. I was thinking, when all is said and done, who would read the stories? Again? They say today's papers are full of tragic lives, of cruelty and injustice - many objected even to showing the story of the Holocaust on television. But perhaps I will be able to write about human kindness, of help given to people in need, of the lives of people who are alive, and still not to forget the shadows of my past.

I have such a story in mind.

During the first World War when the Austrian military authorities started to requisition all metals owned by the population in occupied Poland, they made one exception. Works of art, approved as such by a special committee, could be kept by the owner. Also, religious items could be donated to places of worship.. Our beautiful chandelier, hanging above our dining table, was deemed a work of art.

Mother, who was a widow, donated the chandelier to the synagogue where she and father worshipped. The chandelier was hung there. What happened to it I do not know. Poland, after the liberation from Austrian and German domination, was now a satellite of Russia. There was no sympathy for the Jews or their synagogues, as there had never been.

I still remember the Freitag evenings of my childhood. The chandelier's eight big candles were lit, giving the huge dining room an enchanted image. Father and my brothers sang the Psalm of David, the Song of Songs, praising the woman of valor "her price being above that of rubies." Only much later did I appreciate the beauty of those songs when I read them in translation. As a girl, I was not supposed to learn the Hebrew language and the meaning of the liturgy.

The old world of my youth vanished when Hitler destroyed millions of religious people who were the Guardians of the Faith. After the nightmare of the Nazi regime, the light that nearly went out in the gas ovens, was and is rekindled by a new Renaissance, and a new respect for one's religion and one's traditions can be detected.

Now, looking back on all the changes in my life and the lives of so many, I often think of the times when we were fleeing from the Germans and their inhuman regime. I remember with deep sorrow all the family members lost forever in the Holocaust. Sometimes in my dreams I also see the lost treasures of my home, the beautiful objects given to me as a young bride, the first editions I was so devoted to; the prints, signed by renowned artists, abandoned in haste.

We escaped the horrors of the occupation when a friend discovered my husband's name on a list made up by the Gestapo who looked for men to send to Germany in their so-called working units. I often scold myself for the petty regrets and the nostalgia I feel when I think of those lost objects. How does their loss compare to the loss of human lives?

One object I deeply miss is my mother's bible. It was not an ordinary book, not printed but written in Hebrew script in old Yiddish; not on paper, but on parchment, yellowed with age, with drawings of the text. The binding was of leather, worn from much handling.

Before I heard the story of Cinderella and other fairy tales, I cried when mother read to me of Abraham's test, the sacrifice of his son to the God he loved, and was comforted when God saved Isak from his father's knife. I especially liked the story of the dove who brought back the olive branch to Noah.

Mother was sad every time she read of the destruction of the Temple two thousand years ago. Her tears would fall on the yellow pages.

My father's library held abundant volumes of the Talmud, Tanach and Commentaries. Some of the books were written by his ancestors who were teachers and scholars like himself.

When my brothers left Poland to live abroad, the library was left in my sister's apartment. She inherited the books as well as the precious Bible.

My sister died before the war, a "natural death." But when is it natural to die at the age of forty? At least she was not burned in a gas oven.

The library remained with my sister's husband who was a well known scholar in his own right and the legitimate guardian of the treasures of the family. He was deported by the Nazis and never heard of again.

Years later, when the war was over, I was haunted with nostalgia for the Bible of my family, this heritage of a long line of ancestors, where on the last page, my father recorded the birthdates of his children. I began to make inquiries about the books and my mother's precious Bible.

I learned from a friend who had remained in occupied Poland that the day the German soldiers entered the flat, they tore the Hebrew books and threw them in shreds out the window. And so relics dating back for generations were destroyed by barbarians.

Perhaps someone found the Bible and sold it to an antique dealer who would know its beauty and historic value. Perhaps someone reads and appreciates the book with the yellow pages. Perhaps my mother's tears are not dry as yet, for the future of the land where the book came from is still in jeopardy.

I wrote this story to let my grandchildren know their roots. To let them know of the book their grandmother was brought up on. It is a legacy of values they will perhaps accept or perhaps ignore, but I hope they will not reject altogether. It is up to them.

## ***Nanny Narrates the Voyage***

*When the family left Antwerp they lacked the connections to get into New York and had to settle for Cuba. The trip held several remarkable experiences far out of the comfort zone for a 43-year-old woman who lived a sheltered, traditional life up to that time.*

### **My Sister as I Remember Her**

My sister Resia liked to talk to strangers, to answer their questions, to take interest in their stories. When I criticized her behavior she called me a snob.

Even as a child she used to talk to strangers. We used to live where everybody knew everybody. But every year in the springtime, when gypsies from Croatia used to invade the town while spreading out their tents and their glittering merchandise in the park, she had to be watched. My sister's nurse, who had been with us for many years watched Resia carefully as she roamed around the tables, admiring the jewelry which she loved all her life.

The gypsies were known as thieves. People said they sometimes stole beautiful children. My sister was a beautiful child with an alabaster skin and silky brown hair. The gypsies were nomads, wanderers, and it would be hard to find a missing child.

One day her nurse came home drunk after an evening out. She was sent away by my oldest brother who paid her wages till the end of the month. My sister became hysterical and nothing could console her. She was spoiled even more by everybody in order to comfort her in her chagrin. The abrupt loss of her beloved nurse was a trauma for a sensitive child.

Later as a mother she was very devoted to her children. Her little girl was the best dressed child on the block, her little boy the best behaved. She still talked to strangers and listened to their stories. I still criticized her very often for her behavior.

But one day she was right. It was January 1941. We were running from Belgium and had to stop in Paris in order to obtain permits for crossing the border of unoccupied France.

At this time the names of the concentration camps were not familiar to the Jews of Belgium, but we knew that very soon the Jews of the western countries would be sent to join the German and the Polish Jews in the places of annihilation. We felt trapped in Paris. Like millions of other desperate people we were looking for a means

to escape. We were in search of permits and documents that were constantly refused by the German authorities..

Paris was not the center of the civilized world anymore. Millions of refugees lived in constant fear and anguish. The barbarians were everywhere. It was hell, it was despair. We did not know what to do and we were already exhausted with no hope of finding a solution to our desperate situation.

One day as we all were eating lunch in a Jewish restaurant, my sister started to talk to a stranger who was sitting at the next table.

“Look,” I said to my husband, “You see she does it again--she is talking to a stranger. Who knows who he is? Maybe an agent provocateur! It is she that will be responsible if we land in a concentration camp.”

But all of a sudden, Resia called her husband who started a very' animated conversation with the strange man, who was from a German town where one of my first cousins was married to his brother.

This encounter saved our lives. The man knew a high German official. who could be bribed, and would give us legal papers to cross the border. We sold our diamond rings and paid the large bribe. The new relative brought us in return the needed documents.

Paris was still in chaos, but we could leave. It is no doubt that my sister saved our lives. After that incident I respected her behavior with strangers. It was much more helpful in a dangerous time than my own snobbish attitude.

### **The Village Idiot**

As a child I would listen to stories from the Jewish folk war my mother used to tell. My favorite was the story of the forty just men God sent to earth to help people in distress disguised as beggars or idiots.

There were tales of a man caught in a snowstorm, this carriage driven near a river with a sainted man present and able to stop the carriage on time from falling into the water. Or a story of a lost little child who did not remember where he came from and was helped to find his home.

I sometimes think that Anton, who my family met during the war, was one of those just men.

We were traveling through France, seeking passage to America and found shelter in a small village. A little house was wide

open, empty of furniture except for three beds stripped of their sheets and blankets. We could finally lie down on a bed and stretch our legs.

My husband's father fell asleep within two minutes. He was exhausted not only because of his age—he was 75 years old—but because he was overweight and asthmatic. He kept begging us to go back to Belgium, he missed his comfort. We told him we were trapped in northern France and could not go back without a car.

We were wandering for many weeks, trying to avoid the advancing of the German army whose goal is first to occupy Paris and then all of France. We were hungry and exhausted. The provisions of food that we purchased in a little town we're almost depleted.

The village was close to being abandoned and appeared ghostly. The villagers had left in a panic, scared of the advancing enemy and we did not see a living soul around. We slept, happy to forget for a few hours how desperate our situation really was.

The next morning I woke up very early. I heard footsteps. I looked out of the window and saw young man advancing towards the steps of our house. I woke my husband, and we both came out and asked the young man what he wanted. He answered in the French dialect of the region which I hardly understood.

He finally told us with gestures that he was hungry. I was thinking of my own hungry children, but I gave him a piece of bread and apple. Before he left I gave him some money. My husband disapproved. But I was sorry for the young man who seem to be retarded, and who had probably been left behind by his family.

The next morning I saw the boy sitting on the steps. I knew that I could not give him any food at this time, but to my surprise he carried two long loaves of French bread in along with several sausages on a string.

"Where did you find that?" I asked him. "Did you pay for it?" He did not answer. The money I had given him was not sufficient to pay for the treasure he had found.

He spoke like a five-year-old. When he handed the food to me I did not know what to do. I was almost sure that the food had been stolen, but we needed it desperately and could not have found it on our own.

The food was a godsend, but I had mixed feelings about the young man's exploits. I was afraid that if he were caught we might be accused of being accomplices to his crime. I decided to explore the village and perhaps find out where the boy was stealing the food.



The young man came back several days in a row. He did not take food for himself. I had to give him his share. When I asked him his age he did not know but we thought he was about 18 years old. When he finally understood my question he starts account on his fingers and when he came to 10 he took my hand to count another six or seven. Then he stopped in confusion as he exceeded his capacity.

To find out his name my girls used the old formula “Me Tarzan, You Jane.” Through this we learned that his name was Anton. I did not wear know where he slept, but every morning he was out the door sometimes a special food, like sardines and tuna fish.

After having heard from the farmer of our predicament, he'll come to help as he did for many people stranded in difficult situations. We were told to leave a once in a car provided with gasoline. He handed my husband and keys to an apartment in a nearby town where somebody would be waiting with ration cards, the only means of obtaining food.

We dressed in haste, excited and grateful to the man and to his underground organization. But then my younger girl asked about what would happen to Anton, that in the morning he will find the house empty and his friends gone. We cannot leave without telling him.

I asked the man to help Anton as well.

“Please, he is an unhappy young man retarded and helpless,” I said. “We survived because it is help and devotion and we became his family.”

The man promised to take care of Anton. We left money for him and departed with a heavy heart. Anton was being abandoned once more, this time by us.

I hoped that he found people who gave him health and sympathy, helping him survive in the same way he did for us.

## **The Longest Night**

In September 1941 we were in Bilbao Harbor on the east coast of Spain where thousands of desperate people were trying to obtain space on a small vessel going to Cuba. They were willing to pay any price to get on board that dilapidated Spanish ship. All these people have been running for many months to escape the Gestapo and the collaborating French police. They finally reach Spain where a ship could take them to a shore far from Europe where at any moment they faced capture and a tragic end in concentration camps.

I was waiting for my husband at the harbor, with my two children. He was making a last effort to get us on that boat. He was pleading with the captain who finally assigned to cabins to him for an exorbitant price, depleting our vanishing resources.

From afar I saw my husband's smiling face and his signing victory that told me our agony was over.

The ship's capacity was for only 880 passengers but the captain took on hundreds more. Was it greed or compassion? We did not know, or care.

Insults were exchanged. Tempers flared as fist fights broke out among the disappointed masses that had to be left behind.

The boat left the next day. People who spoke different languages and were from different ethnic origins began to socialize. Elated and relieved from their anxiety, they sang and danced and exchanged information about Cuba where they hope to land, in spite of the Captains warning that the Cuban authorities had not yet granted the needed landing permission.

The weather was glorious, the sea as smooth as a mirror. The same people who were on the brink of despair and hysteria the day before were now exuberant; gloriously happy.

One Jewish man from a shetl in Poland had escaped from a concentration camp. He assured us that God, who had saved us from Hitler's hangman, was on our side and will provide us with a country where would be safe from persecution.

My family enjoyed the trip. Food was abundant, if not of the best quality. The air was invigorating. Only I was suffering from seasickness that kept me in bed in my cabin for several days. I refused food and was even unable to keep down liquids which the doctor orders as life-saving. I had only one wish, to die and do not feel the misery of the sailing anymore.

One day things changed. The captain, an old and very experienced man, was not drunk anymore. He took over the responsibilities from his first mate as the ship was approaching the dangerous zone of tropical hurricanes. A hurricane was announced and was menacing the fragile vessel. Tables and chairs were attached with wire, everything that moved was stabilized.

The wind started to blow. The sea was black and heavy. The ship was moving in a macabre dance up-and-down, up and down. Dinner was forsaken and the people from the steerage were brought up to the higher decks. We heard that all hands were busy below pumping water.

We could not hear the captain's orders due to the storm's deafening sounds. Sometimes, for moment, it was calmer and then we heard the orders that everybody had to be brought up to the highest deck to avoid danger. A steward and my husband helped me out of my bed and I was sitting along with everybody on the deck under a woolen cover which the nurse provided.

My little daughter, ten years old, was undernourished and underdeveloped from the long months of deprivation in Belgium and France. She was clinging to me like a little kitten, frightened and crying.

Suddenly the winds became stronger. The ship rose high and then leaned down far to the left side and then went even higher and lean far to the other. Some people were thrown violently from their place to the other end of the deck. I could not hear their yelling but saw the open mouths of desperate men and women with children in their arms. My little girl whispered in my ear. "Mommy are we going to die?" Her heart, next to mine, was pounding violently.

I could see my husband and teenage daughter, pale as ghosts. But he made a sign of victory with his hands. How could he be so calm and even smile? I knew that he tried to share my frightened child and myself that everything would be fine. But the nurse next to me started to cry, "Santa Maria ayudanos," On the other side a Jewish man with a white beard was praising his God, "Schmai Israel Adonai Elohanu." He was sure his God would not abandon him: "God will save us," he cried. "Didn't he save Noah thousands of years ago and from the same elements?"

I was not so sure. "Dear God," I thought. "What kind of joke are you playing on us, saving us from the gas ovens and then engulfing us in furious waters that will break our little shell of a ship?"

Hours passed, and the wind started to diminish. We found out later that the captain had changed course even though he faced penalties for this insubordination. He sailed back to where we'd started the journey in order to avoid the dangerous hurricane. This cost the company a great deal of money because of the loss of time. But the captain knew that ship overloaded with hysterical people with a long history of panic and disaster could not face the menacing elements any longer.

It was the longest night. When the hurricane was left behind us in the seat around this became a blue mirror again coffee was served and people started to behave normally. When we arrived in Havana we had to wait for almost a month and a camp outside the

city, until Jewish organizations from around the world persuaded or perhaps bribed President Bautista to let us in where we could start a somewhat normal life.

Many times I've had nightmares hearing the howling of the wind and the whispering voice of my frightened child asking if we were going to die. And the the Jewish man who sure that God will be on our side, and then he would save us.

He was right.

## **The Visa**

After running away from Belgium evading Nazi rule and persecution, we came to France. At this time "la drôle de guerre" - the funny war – was finished. The Maginot Line was a sad remembrance of a naive effort to contain the avalanche of Hitler's army. It was no longer the France from the time when one man with his "J'accuse" shook up the conscience of the nation and saved Dreyfus and the honor of a generation with his famous protest.

This time it was the France of Laval, of Petain, and of the Vichy regime, whose police collaborated with the enemy. We found ourselves at the mercy of the meek Vichy regime. One day the refugees from the Northern countries were informed of a new rule. They have to live in a forced residence - "la résidence forcée" - in small villages, where the Nazis would easily find them and send them away to the concentration camps in Poland.

We had hope to get a visa for the U.S.A. from the Consul in Nice. Our relatives in New York had completed all the required guarantees as to our financial status, so that we might emigrate to the country where even Jews live in peace and have an equal opportunity in their pursuit of happiness.

One day the consul told us that the permission was granted - just a few tests were needed. The American doctor gave us a clean bill of health. We were elated at the prospect of leaving France before the disaster, and would escape the rumored atrocities.

But the next day came the unexpected final decision: Emigration for displaced persons, for some political reason, was closed - our visa was refused - we were told to wait.

We did not wait in France. We ran again - this time to Cuba after bribing many channels which lead us to an other period of waiting for the messiah - an American visa!

In Havana the same story took place - some information was needed. We gave it to the consul and then again the visa was refused.

The next time, it was the fourth chapter of the red tape tyranny, I was with my husband in the office of the consul. With exaggerated courtesy, he gave us the news: "No visa!" He stood up to give us the signal that the interview was at an end.

Suddenly my husband, his face as pale as that of a ghost, spoke in a forceful tone.

"Sir, I shall not leave this room until you give me the reason why permission has been refused for the fourth time for our family to emigrate to your country. In spite of fulfilling all the demanded conditions, I am treated by your State Department as a delinquent. How shall I explain this refusal to my wife and my children? What crime am I accused of? They would, and could doubt my integrity!"

I was frozen with fear. What is, he doing, that husband of mine? He, always so calm and composed, never giving in to emotions, is now smashing to pieces our last hope for a decent future.

The Consul looked out of the window for a long while, then turned to face my husband and said "Please come tomorrow to pick up the visa for you and your family."

The torturous five of years of waiting, frustration and humiliation was over.

At this moment, when my husband put at stake a chance of a lifetime, fighting for the recognition of his integrity I fell in love once more with the man I married twenty years ago. He looked very beautiful when he challenged fate.

*The Visa: (clockwise from upper left) Isak, Lili, Stella and Bronia.  
Granted on November 7, 1945,*



*Lilian Maringer Bermant ("Mom," "Lili") lived from August 13, 1927 to May 7, 2011.*

## **Lili Remembers Her Childhood**

My earliest recollections include a major temper tantrum at the age of three, when I refused to put on leggings to go on an outing with my mother, and being left home to stew about my decision. Or being thrilled that I contracted the chicken pox one summer when I was 4 because it meant my having to be brought home from the summer camp which I passionately hated.

We walked to school every day, twice a day, because we went home for our main meal, a hot lunch. My sister and I lived about a half hour walk from our school and one could see a procession of kids of all sizes coming from all directions heading for school around 8:00 AM every morning--- then going home every noon --- and again to school at 1:30 PM and lastly home at 4:30 PM. We had to cross several busy streets along the way, and the big kids kind of looked after the little ones, even first graders. I don't remember ever seeing a mother accompanying her little kids to school. In fact, anytime a mother came to the school, we knew that her child was in big trouble. You never wanted to have a parent anywhere near the school.

The classrooms were quite large. There may have been 30 children in each class, although I never counted them. We sat two to a desk, the shorter ones up front. From first grade and on, I always shared a desk in the front row with my short friend Monique. This continued for the six years of our elementary education. Monique was a troublemaker: first, she talked a lot, and we were not allowed to talk in class unless called upon by the teacher. Of course, I answered, and so, there was trouble. The other, unforgivable thing she did was to bring candy to class. We were not allowed to eat or chew anything in class. Needless to say, I never refused a little piece of candy proffered to me.

Trouble again!

I was constantly and unfavorably compared to my sister. She was two grades ahead of me and I ended up with every teacher she ever had. Not good. The only saving grace was that I was actually a good student and often was among the top five students in the class. We were ranked from 1 to 30 about twice a year after exams, and everyone knew your number. I couldn't possibly be more than a 5, given all my other shortcomings.

When I talk about teacher, I mean Teacher, capital T. Our teacher sat at a desk located on a platform, placing her (always her) above the students, like an emperor .

We learned a lot – math, grammar, geography, history, foreign languages – but I don't ever remember any student being invited to offer an original thought. We were like little monkeys, memorizing a lot, and mostly regurgitating what we were taught.

I must have been in fourth grade when one particular incident made a big impression on me. We were supposed to memorize about six or seven poems. Each of us had to come in front of the class, pick a little piece of paper from a bowl on the teacher's desk and recite the poem whose title appeared on the paper. I always knew my poems and never worried about which one I would get. One little girl, though, when it was her turn, came to the front, picked up a paper and announced the title of the poem she was to recite. There must have been something in her demeanor which caused the teacher to look at the paper she had just carefully folded and returned to the pile, and to realize that the student had lied. She wanted to recite the poem she knew, not the one she had picked.

To me, that was the epitome of daring and audacity, and I actually admired that girl for challenging the status quo and trying to alter the inevitable. I knew I would never have had the courage to defy authority as she did.

As I remember that day so long ago, I realize that there is something of that regard for authority, that acceptance of what is rather than challenging it, that I often saw in myself as I got older, much to my chagrin. Over time, as I was growing up, I was not encouraged to challenge or confront power or authority, either in my home or in the course of the eight years of European education I experienced.

I am thankful that my exposure to what I call the American Way has helped me to face that particular shortcoming and to try to conquer it little by little.

A few words about my family dynamics: In brief, it was all about language. Both my parents were born in Poland. Dad's parents left that country with their three sons and two daughters in 1905, when my father was about ten years old and moved to Antwerp, Belgium. While they spoke Yiddish at home, the children learned Dutch very quickly, even though the three boys started working in their father's jewelry store after they complete eighth grade. My grandmother died when I was four years old and I don't remember anything about her. From that family's side, there were



never any celebratory events that I can remember. One of the brothers moved to America in 1935, another died in his 30's, and an older sister met and married a Dutch man who took her back to Holland. So two sibling and Grandpa remained in Antwerp.

My mother's family stayed in Poland throughout the First World War. Mom, one of nine children, told me that she yearned to go to school beyond high school, but that wasn't an option in her Orthodox Jewish family. Still, she read a lot, took odd courses here and there, and studied French. When the call from a rich uncle requesting that his bright niece join him in Brussels so she could help take care of his arthritic wife, my mother jumped at the opportunity. For three years, she traveled with her aunt to healing baths in Germany, or stayed with her in her beautiful house in Brussels. Both her German and her French were very much improved by the time one of her brothers (who had emigrated to Antwerp) suggested she join him there; he knew a very nice young man he wanted her to meet because he thought it was about time she got married. I'm not sure it happened quite that way, but the reality is that my parents did meet and got married in Antwerp.

Dad spoke Yiddish and Dutch. Mom spoke Polish, French and German. To each other, Dad spoke Yiddish and Mom spoke German. That became an issue when children were born: what language to raise them in. Since we were in Belgium and mother spoke no Dutch, it was going to be French. Dad protested that he wouldn't be able to talk to his children. Mother said: "You'll just have to learn French with them."

Dad did learn some French and he understood it pretty well. We, the children, learned to speak German. Still, the sad truth is that I was never – and I mean never – able to have a real conversation with my father beyond day-to-day talk at mealtimes, or simple requests from either of us. He was a sweet and gentle man and it breaks my heart that we never really knew each other well.

My mother was the dominant person in my sister's and my life. She always used to say "Dad goes to work to make money, I take care of the children and the home." She used to have interesting mottos, like: "A mother is always right" (Boy, did I find out from experience how wrong she was!) or "The best lie is the truth." And, oh yes, she would also say when she thought I might not be telling the truth: "Look into my eyes, I can always tell if you have lied!" For many years, I bought that myth and avoided looking into her eyes whenever I got caught lying, with unpleasant consequences, of course. Until one day I had taken a piece of forbidden chocolate and

when I denied the deed, she said “Look into my eyes,” I did. It was a historic moment. She believed me. No thunder and lightning, no dire consequences. Talk about a landmark! It took my mother just a short while to figure out that I had outfoxed her. Still, Mother remained as the main arbiter of our comportment for a few more years.

Was I loved? Sure I was. Parents love their kids, don’t they? I know for sure that I was cared for, protected, corrected and guided. Over the years, I heard a lot of orders: don’t slouch, don’t complain, don’t argue, don’t chew loudly, don’tAs I think about it, unlike children today, I did not feel respected. I don’t remember ever having the opportunity to argue a point, to have an opinion other than the one offered. I could not raise my voice to my mother, or stomp my foot, or slam the door in anger. My best outlet was to stick my tongue out to my mother – behind the closed door of my room.

Still, I enjoyed a certain level of freedom. I did not spend much time with my parents. When I was not in school, I mostly spent my free time with my friend, Blanche, who lived one floor above me. We roller skated to the main park, where we met other friends and spent hours hanging out; we went to the movies, we played games...

Until the war, there was stability and predictability in my life. After that, everything changed.

### *Lili Comes to America*

The family waited in Cuba for their admission to the United States. Once arrived Mom enrolled in Brooklyn College and received an English degree (she’d learned both English and Spanish during the family’s Cuba sojourn).

She loved New York and its energy. In the midst of tragedy and dispatches about dead relatives, she still realized that the war was the best thing that could have happened to her as it got her out of Antwerp.

In 1948 she stayed in a Connecticut resort with the family, striking up a connection with a waiter, Oser Irvin Bermant (“Ozzie,” “Dad.”) who was born on April 4, 1927 and died November 14 1998. The two were together for two years before marrying on May 28, 1950.

Dad, an engineering graduate from City College had a few random jobs before landing a position at an exciting start-up called IBM. The family, now including a son (Charles Mark Bermant, March 27, 1954—) moved an hour north to Poughkeepsie and bought

their first three bedroom house. The third bedroom was soon filled by Julie Rae Bermant (April 28, 1958—).

Mom enrolled in the SUNY New Paltz in 1965 to earn an education degree. A year later she broke her leg on the Hunter Mountain ski slopes, using it as an occasion to quit smoking.

The family moved to the Washington DC suburbs where Mom began working as a home instruction teacher for kids who were unable to attend school for long periods of time. Her best subject was French, due to her multilingual abilities, but she took on English, math and history.

As her own children chafed under her unreasonable restrictions her students found her to be more understanding and interesting than their own parents. One of them, a brilliant and bored kid named Gerry DeWitt who became a prominent ophthalmologist, was a friend for life.

In 1972, Dad took a job in Brussels, just 40 miles south of Antwerp. I stayed in the states, while Mom, Dad and Julie spent three years as Europeans. They travelled the continent, and Mom was able to take the family to her childhood home, which looked modern from the outside. On one visit she walked me by the tracks in which she had placed a marble as a child, intending to derail the trolley when it arrived. She recalled that as she watched she had second thoughts and almost rushed over to remove the obstacle but it was smashed to bits.

The family returned to their Maryland house in 1975; empty nesters as the kids were both attending Boston colleges. IBM didn't know what to do with Dad, loaning him to various organizations, such as the University of District of Columbia and the House of Representatives. A lifelong Democrat, he struck up a friendship with a conservative Republican New York congressman, Joseph DioGuardi, who went on to become the Republican nominee in 2010 for the United States Senate (he was defeated by Kirsten Gillibrand).

In 1982, a disgruntled IBM employee took over Dad's office, wielding a gun and taking hostages. He was out of the office, attending Julie's nursing school graduation in Baltimore. The family was grateful for this, as he certainly would have been at the front of the action, using his negotiation and problem solving skills to diffuse the situation. These things don't always go well.

Dad later said the gunman had good reason for his displeasure while disagreeing with his tactics.

Julie and Charlie both married in 1988, and both marriages ended in 2004. Julie married David Farkas and gave birth to Mira

Bermant Farkas (March 10, 1995—); Nanny's third great grandchild. The couple divorced for reasons that are none of your business. I married Jill Pembroke, who died September 23, 2004 after a four year battle with Stage 4 breast cancer.

Neither spouse got on well with their in-laws. Mom and Dad could be controlling and critical. The spouses, stubborn in their own right, did not take well to the criticism that strained their respective marriages.

The kids both remarried people who embraced Mom and her quirks. Dad wasn't so lucky, dying from a stroke in November, 1998. He never knew that his kids finally got it right.

After ten years of widowhood, Mom decided the 3,000 square foot three level home purchased with Dad in 1967 was too big. While she expected to live into her 90s Mom realized her mortality and did not want to burden the kids with the task of disassembling forty years of history. Instead, the entire family visited over the summer of 2009 to pack boxes and let go of saved possessions.

Mom moved to Amherst, buying a condo a few miles away from Julie, David and Mira. The desire to get closer to Mira was never satisfied, as teenagers always defy the expectations of their relatives.

Julie loved having Lili close by. They saw each other on average once a week, going for a walk or to dinner. Lili enjoyed joining Julie and her husband David contra dancing. She danced the Saturday night before she died. Lili had lots of expectations of Mira, and arrived in the area at the same time Mira was becoming more independent and less interested in spending time with her family. They did spend time together which they enjoyed, but Lili mourned the easy relationship they had had on visits when Mira was younger. The morning of mother's day, Mira left an email asking if she could interview Lili for a school project. Lili never got that email.

I visited her in Amherst in April 2011, visiting Mom in her new home for the first time. It had been more than a year since they'd seen each other, and they fell into a comfortable banter. I was able to solve a few crises, when Mom misplaced her new iPhone I knew to search the space between the seat and the console.

Weeks later, on Mother's Day, Julie and Mom set out to hike the Amethyst Brook Trail, one of their favorite places. About two thirds of the way up, Mom slipped and fell down an embankment, landing in a meadow where she died. Julie was at her side. She phoned me, living across the country and working as a news reporter, who arrived the following day.

After the shock of Mom's death I realized that I'd visited my parents in November 1998 after not seeing them for about eighteen months. Dad died three weeks later. By that time all of the valued relatives of my parents' generation were gone, but I am still hesitant to visit anyone and to this day travels to the East Coast only sporadically.

In 2019 I began assembling Nanny's writings, which then led to an exploration of Mom's prose. I added some of my own to connect the two, and put them into historical perspective.

That same year Julie became a storyteller. One of her first public readings, transcribed on the following page, was a tribute to Mom; how she lived and died.



### ***Julie Witnesses Tragedy***

*“Oh my god! That is a photo of my mother as a teenager in Havana, Cuba” I said to my husband as I watched a preview for a movie I had never seen and knew nothing about, portraying Jews who had travelled from Antwerp to Havana during World War II. My mother had made that trip.*

*Despite the horrors of World War II, my mother always said that it was the best thing that had happened to her, because it had allowed her to leave her provincial home and travel the world. My mother’s family left Antwerp and travelled to the south of France where they stayed until it was no longer safe, and then travelled through Spain and got on a boat to Cuba, where they hoped to stay for 4 months, and stayed for 4 years. It was not until after the war was over in 1945, that they were able to get a visa to get into the US. My mother was 18.*

*My mother’s family tried to protect her, but they were only partially able to do that. When they left Antwerp they were on foot, so my mother was only able to bring with her what she could carry in a small suitcase, or a valise, as my mother called it. She left with her mother, her father, her older sister, and her elderly grandfather who insisted on wearing his heavy winter coat, despite the warm spring day.*

*They walked towards an area in France that had been safe during World War I, but would not prove to be safe during World War II. As they walked in a line of refugees, carrying their suitcases, the line was attacked by German gunfire from above, and as the machine gun fire rained down on them, my mother rolled into a ditch. As she lay there, she said to herself "I hope that I will be OK, and I hope that my family will be OK." My mother and her family were OK, but many people died on that road that day, including a young boy who had been walking beside my mother.*

*Despite these experiences, my mother loved adventure. When she was 81, she took me to the high ropes course. She climbed 30 feet in the air, and she climbed on the rope bridge, and she reveled as she hooked herself into the harness and went zipping through the trees. She was blissful. There is a photo of her looking very happy on that zipline, and that is the photo we used for her obituary.*

*Mother's Day 2011, my mother said to me "Julie, I want to go hiking with you on Mother's Day"*

*"That's a great idea", I said, "I'll go hiking on Mother's Day if you will come contra dancing with me the night before."*

*"It's a deal," she said.*

*Off we went off into the woods. It was a beautiful day, with the sun dappling through the trees and the leaves crunching under our feet. "Mom", I said, "I want to go back to Antwerp with you. I want you to show me where you lived. I want you to show me that walk between your home to school that you talk about".*

*"I'd love that" my mother said. "Let's do it in the fall".*

*About a half hour later, we climbed a steep part of the trail, and as we climbed, my mother slipped. As we climbed, my mother fell. I am a nurse practitioner, and I knew that when she fell those 30 feet, she was not going to be OK. And I knew that she would not want to live in a body that was not fully functional. And so I sat with my mother. I did not do CPR. And I held her hand as she died.*

*My mother gave me the joy of being outside and the joy of adventure, and I knew on that beautiful, horrible day, that it was the perfect way for her to die.*

*Pictured: Lili on the zipline*

## *Charlie Ponders Publishing*

The family published three volumes of Nanny's stories, all under the *Yesterday and Today* title. They were double spaced pica-font pages bound in calligraphed folders, copied enough made for friends and family. After each one she received admiring notes, a version of fan mail, urging her to continue writing and expressing how they deserved "real" publication as a book or in a magazine.

Some of these letters survived, passed on to Lili at Nanny's death and again to Lili's children, ending up in a folder discovered while assembling Nanny's writings for this project. Among these, a note from a Mr. Harry Hogan from Bethesda, Maryland, reading in part "The stories are so sensitively written, with such a sense of family and history. I wish that my grandmother or grandfather had done something like your articles. Their great grandchildren, who never knew them, would be able to read their writings and understand their past." Or this from Flora Atkin: "Your mother's stories, so fresh, sensitive—childlike in the sense of (Isaac Bashevas) Singer's writings—are a delight."

Some of these so-called fans were probably just being polite, as it would serve no purpose to tell Nanny her stories weren't any good. I can only speak definitively for myself, but it appeared the stories had obvious merit. An elderly, literate woman writing about her life, which happened to include one of the most monumental events in human history. This is a common literary theme, the hero's journey, where an ordinary person faces extraordinary challenges and lives to tell the tale. She wrote because she owed it to her family, recognizing those who died while ensuring that the survivors, the descendants, never forgot their origins. And there was the perhaps naive notion that retelling these stories would prevent such cruelty from recurring.

My work brought me to New York several times in 1981, during which time I left a three-year-old edition of *Writer's Market*, the freelance writer's bible. Nanny offered to pay for the book, but I already had the latest edition. It was a turning point, the ability to gift one's grandmother with something she could actually use.

She began picking appropriate publications and sending off queries. The initial ones were handwritten, as were the stories. After no success she began asking friends and relatives to type the stories and the letters, but that didn't change things much.

Many of the responses that survive, from the same folder as Mr. Hogan's letter, are curt, pre-printed postcards. There are impersonal cards from Seventeen, Mademoiselle, McCalls and Good



Housekeeping. These rejections were expected, as the stories were too somber for these markets.

More personal responses came from Hadassah Magazine Avon Books and Commentary. Ms Magazine sent a handwritten note in blue marker: "This is a wonderful story but not right for us. I do suggest you send it to other women's magazines." Nanny was excited to receive this and showed it to me. I agreed that it was special. Except I recalled my own rejection from Ms. years earlier written on similar stationary and the same marker color. Perhaps that was the magazine's style for rejection slips, so struggling writers didn't feel rejected.

Judging from my own publication failure, I didn't think Nanny had much of a chance for success. On the other hand, had any of these magazines accepted her work he would have presented her clips proudly, as if they were his own.

*Yesterday and Today* was sent, in its entirety, to several publishers. It was rejected for the reason which no writer can provide an argument, that it does not fit our format. There weren't enough stories to warrant publication in book form, and they were not substantial enough to stand on their own.

My advice had run its course, and Nanny suspected that objectivity was beyond my reach. She then sought professional help in the form of the Scott Meredith Literary Agency, which represented authors in their dealings with publishers but also had a side business. An experienced agent would read and evaluate a writer's efforts and provide detailed criticism.

I recently recovered several single-spaced letters from the Meredith Agency that included detailed evaluations of several stories. They provided some constructive criticism but were ultimately discouraging. They demonstrated how money changes everything. If she had sent her stories to Meredith for review the response would most likely be returned with a stiff, pre-printed rejection notice. Since she paid for the evaluation, she received the somewhat overwritten response that a story was "irreparably below the level of contemporary salability; those flaws are absolutely intrinsic and will not yield to a revision and we are compelled, then, to return this to you without further recommendation with a good deal of the most genuine regret."

I don't know how Nanny reacted to these letters. She would be too polite to criticize, but might have been more comfortable if the verbiage was stripped away for the obvious message: "This is

unpublishable. You need to rewrite the whole thing. And you need to buy my book to guide you through the process.”

She wasn’t entirely pleased with the feedback as evidenced by a surviving letter (perhaps a draft) addressed to Meredith expressing her reluctance to spend any more money for his services.

Meredith, who also compared Nanny to Isaac Bashevas Singer in a peripheral way, still accurately characterized the stories as “folk tales, anecdotes or little offhand snapshots of people and their situation which do not cohere into a fictional framework.” Here, he was reviewing a selection of stories that had around 25,000 words, which was then about half of what would be required to publish a slim volume. Additionally, any publisher would demand credentials and previous publication.

“There is no audience for books of this brevity unless the writer is a celebrity and has accomplishments in another field,” he wrote, suggesting that she attempt publication in a local newspaper or small literary magazine.

Meredith’s wisdom was spot on, projecting maximum sales for such a book would not cover costs, so no publisher would make the investment. His honesty, then, was refreshing.

That was then. *Yesterday and Today*, as it exists in this form, is about 25,000 words. There are no rules or standards in self publishing, you can put something out of any length and content without worrying about whether it will sell or not.

Big books are like concerts or events, with large halls filled to the rafters with eager spectators. It would be wrong then or now to project such fortune for *Yesterday and Today*, which more resembles a small family picnic in a suburban back yard.

## ***Nanny Embraces New York***

*The family finally made it to New York, a place that initially scared her but one she quickly learned to love. She lived there nearly half her life, and while she traveled frequently to Europe and other locations New York was where she belonged.*

### **The Taxi**

We arrived in New York in the winter of 1945, after spending many years in Cuba. Our relatives provided us with a furnished apartment and gave us winter clothing till we could purchase our own. My husband found work immediately. My daughters were happy, one at work already, the other one in college. I was the only one who did not find myself as yet adjusted to the new ways, although I was happy that normal life had begun again for my family.

One morning, feeling lonely in the apartment, I decided to go for a walk to explore my new neighborhood. I wrote down on a piece of paper my new address, not yet familiar to me, and put it with a five dollar bill in the pocket of my coat. It was snowing outside. I had not seen snow in a very long time and I enjoyed the snow flakes falling on my face. I started to walk, never mind where to. It was beautiful to see so many people rushing in different directions.

The weather changed drastically. The wind started to blow with a strength unknown to me. I realized that this was a storm, increasing from minute to minute. I was frantic and started to look for a taxi. None was in sight, and when I finally spotted one, it was taken. I started to walk some more, feeling very cold and scared. "My God, what am I going to do?" Taxi after taxi passed by, not stopping in spite of my frantic, desperate gestures. I never knew how terrible a blizzard could be in New York. I started to think about Havana, about the blue sky, the sun.

"Why did I leave the enchanted island? Why did I come to be in a blizzard on a street corner?" I wanted to sit down on the steps of a house nearby, but the wind pushed me away. I knew that sitting down was a silly wish, but I did not care anymore, I was in a daze and delirious.

Before I could reach the steps of the house, a taxi stopped in front of me. The driver came out and asked me if I needed a ride. "The passenger inside my car is willing to share it with you," he said. He took my arm and led me to his cab.

Inside, I started to feel better, but for a while I could not speak to answer their questions, exhausted from my fight with the winds, and the snow. I did not speak English and did not understand their questions. But then I read the name of the driver on his plate and I realized that I could speak to him in Yiddish, and tell him what happened.

The passenger left after a while, paid the driver and urged him to bring me home. We were still on the East side and I lived on the West side.

I began to tell him my story in Yiddish, how I came to be in New York and why I spoke no English yet. "Those, monsters" the driver was referring to the Germans, "beasts!" I fought against them in the first World War but it was different altogether! They killed, we killed, but they fought a war against men, not women and children. They fought for their country just as we did for ours. You know, lady," he said, "you will be happy here. I am sure! Here a Jew has his rights. We send our men to the Congress and they defend us when it is needed. We are good citizens and we love our country.

"One day I picked up two passengers on East 86th Street. They wanted to go to Lake Success where the United Nations had their headquarters. We were already one-half hour driving, when I heard the name of Hitler mentioned. I knew from other passengers what happened in Europe, and as the men were talking in German, I started to listen.

"One man said, 'He made Europe Judenfrei - free of Jews - it is only a pity he did not clean out our lower East side from the Jewish vermin living there.'"

"I stopped the taxi. I opened the door and yelled: 'Get out. I do not want to serve you. I am one of those dirty Jews from the East side. Get out!'

'How do you dare,' they said. 'You have to bring us to our destination. We are expected.'

"Before they could harm me, they were two, after all, a police car, controlling the speed of cars on the highways, stopped. The officer was asking, 'What is the problem, buddy?' The men started to insist on their right not to be left on the road and to be brought to their destination. I still refused, telling the officer the reason for my unusual behavior. 'Let them sue me I said.'

The officer, an Irishman, took the number of my car, but let me go! I depicted a twinkle in his eyes."

"You see, lady," continued the driver, "here in New York we are not afraid to speak up! One feels like a 'mensch,' a human being. You will be happy here I am sure."

When I wanted to pay as we arrived, he refused, telling me that the gentleman had paid generously for the trip. I started to believe the legend of the colorful taxi drivers of New York I had heard so much about. I was grateful to him for giving me an encouraging picture of New York with his example.

My family found me at the dinner table in a wonderful mood. I asked my husband to stop his efforts to get the needed papers that would give us the right to go back to the country where we lived before the war.

"Please let us stay here," I said. "Forget about going back. I feel at home here!"

All three were looking at me, wondering. I did not let them know of my adventure. They would think that it was silly to go out in that terrible weather.

We did not go back. We stayed. I still love New York.

### **The Block Party**

A block party was planned on the street where I lived for many years.

The neighborhood was in a residential part of Manhattan, but with immigrants of different ethnic groups making their home in the city many apartment houses had changed to tenements where daily comings and goings were observed with anxiety by the residents of the still high-priced apartments.

Many evenings were spent in the neighboring church to organize the party. Everyone was encouraged to participate and to make an effort to insure the success of the fiesta.

On the day of the party the weather was especially beautiful, the way it can be in the month of May. Everybody contributed, some with gifts and others with crafts. It was a beautiful sight with all the colors and the original displays of handicraft.

Many tongues were heard. Bands of young high school students played the tunes of their origins. There was also a group of jazz players with long hair whose loud improvisations inundated the air. Residents and visitors sat at tables which had been set up on the sidewalk; self service was the rule, and every body could buy their own ethnic food, or taste that from the others.

I donated a huge apple cake and latkes which our neighbors devoured in no time. People paid a minimal price for each portion and praised each other's efforts. The money would buy new trees for our block and was contributed generously,

At our table were sitting a young doctor and his girlfriend. They had just rented an apartment in one of the houses. He told us that very soon they would get married.

"Yes, tell them" said the doctor, "how you caught me in your trap. It was to give in to the wishes of your father, wasn't it? He hates me anyway, and has for many years, since we started to live together."

"Darling" said the girl, "he never hated you. He admired your determination and your energy and the fact that you worked your way up to this point on your own."

"You helped, he said.

"A little," said the girl. "I darned your socks, cooked your meals, and held your hand when you despaired.. Father did not approve that the only child of a religious Jew such as he is was living in sin."

"If this is sin, my God, then sin is beautiful," he said. "Our sin was the most stimulating thing in the world. It helped me to achieve a victory, to get to where I wanted to be. You know, as a non-believer from way back. To have to stand under the chupa will not be easy for me."

"What is that - a chupa?" asked the super of our house, sitting at our table. He was from the midwest, and had never heard that word. The young girl explained.

"It is a canopy under which we will take our vows, in the name of our ancestors, Abraham, Isaak, Jacob, Rebecca and Rachel. To be married traditionally, a glass will be crushed under the heel of the groom, in remembrance of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, never forgotten by the Jews in the whole world."

"Real nonsense" said the young man. "As if this ceremony would change our love, our devotion to each other. It will only please the Father of my darling. So be it!"

We, at the table, listened with amusement to this exchange of opinions of the young couple, expressing their different beliefs and feelings, and still in love with each other.

The girl turned to us.

"The quotation we were talking about goes like this: 'I expect to pass through life but once, if therefore there be any kindness I can

do, to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it as I shall not pass this way again."

The young man kissed her tenderly. I was thrilled that the block party gave me the opportunity to meet those beautiful people at our table.

The party was very successful. You could see different people of different origins, listen to different tongues, taste different foods. My guests, who had come especially from the suburbs to see a block party in Manhattan, were enthusiastic about so many people belonging to different ethnic groups, living in harmony. When they expressed their admiration for the party, the young doctor said: "New York did not become a melting pot as every body expected at the start of the century. Let's hope people shall respect each other's beliefs and religions at all times, not only at fiestas."

The girl smiled.

"You are not as bad as you sound," she said, "Marry me, darling. We shall be happy for ever after. I promise!"

They left. Two beautiful human beings.

A couple of weeks later, the super came to my flat to tell me: "You know, the young couple you met at the block party were married and took over the apartment, but the old Father of the girl died a day after they were married. How sad," said the super "but he lived to see : his daughter become an honest woman!"

That man did not realize that the young girl was honest before she married. I presumed he shared the opinions of Archie Bunker whom he said he watches religiously on television.

## *Charlie Sketches Nanny in a 2019 Writing Class*

**November 9, 1962**

I'd heard Nanny's stories about her family, how six of her siblings were killed by the Nazis just because they were Jews. "We should be forever thankful that being Jewish in Poughkeepsie is different than during the war," she said after we finished healthy portions of lamb chops and topped it off with ice cream. "We didn't have to run or hide. May we never have to run or hide again."

She spoke slowly, not taking any shortcuts with the words or their meaning. English was at least her fourth language. Her accent transformed the 'th' sound into an 's.' Before bedtime she always tell me to "brush your teese."

She'd told stories about her family before, but this was the first time that I took them personally. If the Germans hadn't started the war, if there was no Hitler, millions of Jews would still be alive. Nanny would still have her brothers and sisters, Mom would not have come to America and met Dad, and I would not exist.

Hitler changed the world with a powerful evil, yet I emerged from that evil. To wish him away would make me disappear with a 'plip,' like a cartoon genie.

I couldn't tell Mom about any of this. She would reassure me, saying that things worked out for the better because I was here today. As for Nanny, she certainly new that I existed at the expense of her birth family.

Given the choice, they might not choose me. I didn't want to know so I kept my mouth shut.

It was on my mind for months, that Hitler was responsible for my existence. It was an obvious secret. Everyone in my family knew about Hitler, and knew the story. I was apparently the only one who made the connection, as no one said it out loud.

I could be split in two, maybe more. My Belgian half would wander old, dreary buildings, like the pictures in our encyclopedia. I would speak French, which I knew to be difficult and incomprehensible as Mom spoke it with Nanny all the time. I would visit old relatives who spoke Hebrew. I would learn Hebrew myself, as I needed to study for my Bar Mitzvah in a few years. Of that, there would be no doubt.

My New York half would go to see the Yankees play on a regular basis. I'd learn how to ride the subway, and know all of the sandlots and parks in my neighborhood where we could play ball or



talk about the neighbors. I'd go around the block to avoid the rough kids, who would take my money or hit me if my pockets were empty.

These were guesses, based on the observations of my own cousins. Lynn, three years older and on my mother's side, lived in Brussels and visited every few years. She talked about Europe's rich, mysterious history and its variety of life today. Older cousins Eugene and Paul, on Dad's side, lived in the Bronx where they had to navigate broken sidewalks and brutal bullies, making daily life a constant adventure. Maybe I'd get used to it, but I didn't think so.

My European half would be studious and serious, clad in dark clothes. My American half would eat Italian Ices and play baseball in the summer and toboggan down the hills in Van Cortland Park in wintertime. There would be a lot of jokes. Dad's family was always laughing, while the jokes needed repeating before Mom's family would get them.

Thinking it through while walking alone in an empty field that was part of Tommy Sleight's father's farm I decided that I was glad to be just me, even if Hitler deserved thanks. It would be more fun to live in New York where everything moved rapidly than a European visiting old relatives in dusty apartments speaking dead languages.

I didn't think about this for too long. Because I belonged exactly where I was at the time.

### **March 27, 1964**

The buzzer sounded, and the Diamond Exchange door opened. We entered a room with cloudy, stale air that would have been bright of not for the heavy smoke that sat below the low ceilings. It was full of men in dark clothes who wore hats and beards and moved slowly. They greeted Nanny and invited her to sit down but did not shake her hand. I sat on a chair just behind her.

'This is my grandson, Charles," she said, with her arm around my shoulder. "It's his tenth birthday."

"Soon he will be Bar Mitzvah," one said. Nanny didn't react, nor did I. That was not a sure thing, and we didn't want to talk about it there.

She was the only woman in the room. She wore a plain brown pinstripe dress, with a small green brooch pinned just below her neck. Her rings and earrings sparkled a polished silver while her small, square watch was a tarnished gold. Her feet, which I knew were covered with bumps and blisters, were hidden by brown round toed high heels that didn't seem to make her any taller.

Envelopes with money and stones passed back and forth. The stones lacked the luster of the ones on her ring.

"They look like regular rocks," I whispered.

"They have yet to be polished," she said, adding that it takes skill to see the value in a handful of regular stones. Which she learned from her late husband, whose accounts she now managed.

Nanny put the envelopes in her large, black handbag. One of the men said "Bronia, you should not be walking around with that in your purse."

"I am very careful," she answered, bowing her head slightly and allowing the man to think he had offered wise advice. "And we are only a few blocks away from the bank."

After the bank we went to the movies, a James Bond double feature. We arrived an hour into Dr. No, but it didn't make a difference.

### **September 20, 1972**

I'd visited Nanny's apartment all my life. We stayed there whenever the family visited New York. It had two equal parts. Elegant "living" and "dining" rooms took half the square on the south. The other side stacked a bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. They were probably the same size, but the north side where Nanny ate and slept felt small and cluttered in comparison. There were windows on either side of the apartment but the light never really got inside as both directions looked over alleyways.

On this day an element of chaos replaced its typical dusty quiet as more than thirty people filled the apartment. They were eating, drinking and complaining about the world as Jews tend to do. The gathering was to commemorate my family's move to Belgium, where Mom was born. Dad got a transfer to IBM's Brussels office, and the big move was just two weeks away.

I was struggling through my first few weeks of community college, having decided to stay in my safe place rather than take a chance on a foreign country where I didn't speak the language. Depending on my mother to tell the waitress what I wanted. That was not gonna happen.

Like any new high school graduate I was chafing to get out from under my parents rule and was not inclined to do anything that would ruin that plan. That Mom and Dad were footing the bill for my apartment, schooling and other needs sealed the deal. Added to that, It wasn't going smoothly, as I was on the way to flunking out of

school. French was a killer. Mom and Nanny spoke it together all the time and it didn't seem that hard for them, but it was a bitch to learn at my age. They had the advantage they learned it as children.

Many of the assembled relatives made the journey from Europe to New York to escape the Nazis. They had become prosperous in New York but still carried a wounded look, like their good fortune could disappear at any time. They were envious and excited that Mom would be able to visit the place of her birth, unmolested by war and fear. They were mostly from Mom's side. With a few exceptions, they were less interesting or tolerant than Dad's family, that was giving us a similar sendoff the next afternoon.

So I couldn't wait for today to end and for tomorrow to begin. Right then, one lost uncle after the other said that I must be so excited to live in Europe. After I corrected them, they would reflexively ask when I was going to cut my hair.

One of my mother's cousins, and old guy in a gray suit, was holding court, bloviating about the upcoming election.

"I am voting for Nixon because he is best for Israel," he huffed.

"I am voting for McGovern because he is best for America," I spouted back without hesitation. The Nixon administration, for all its perceived faults, had lowered the voting age to 18.

He didn't respond directly, turning to someone who might have been his brother and saying "they can vote now. What next?"

I was proud of myself for standing up to an adult but unwilling to take the debate any further. I was sure of my own righteousness but didn't want to defend my position. He wasn't going to change his mind, neither was I. So I took refuge next to the moist poundcake that was unavailable anywhere outside of New York City.

This night couldn't end soon enough, I wanted to go to the party tomorrow where I could smoke a joint with my cousin Paul. I wanted to get back to college and my new life, without parents. I needed to get back into the language lab as soon as possible, so I could learn enough to order my own beer when I visited Belgium in December.

## *Lili Narrates the Voyage*

I wake up with a start. There is this sound I don't recognize that seems to come from all around me.

I check my sister's bed. She's not there, though I did not hear her get up and leave the room. I look at my bedside clock. Five o'clock in the morning. So early! The sound persists.

I get up and open my bedroom door. My parents and my sister are standing in front of the big window in the living room, and are looking up at the sky. "What are you looking at?" I ask. My parents seem upset, my sister is crying, the radio is on. A man's voice is calling names and numbers, none of which I understand.

I look up. The sun has just risen and the sky is a bright, bright blue. Several planes are flying very high. Around each plane, little puffs of black smoke form, one after the other after the other. Anti-aircraft guns, says my father. That is the sound I have been hearing.

"Dad, what does that mean?" I ask.

My father answers in a tense voice, almost as if he were talking to himself. He is still looking up. "These are German planes. They have attacked Belgium. According to the news, Germany has declared war on our country. The army is calling up all the eligible men to join the fight. We are listening to the news to find out what's happening, what we should do next."

I, too, begin to cry. I don't understand what's going on and my parents are too preoccupied to explain more. Isn't war what happens in history books? How is it possible we are talking about war in our own living room? Is my father going to have to fight the Germans, too? Am I dreaming? Is this real?

Yesterday, our sixth-grade class went on a field trip to the countryside, something that happened very rarely. We had a lot of fun, running after butterflies, playing tag, eating the picnic lunch each of us had brought. Just before it was time to leave, I picked a bunch of lily-of-the-valleys and brought them home. They were beautiful. I can see them now, rows of little white bells, sitting on top of the piano in a glass jar. Yesterday seems a long time ago.

I hear my mother's voice: "Go wash up and don't forget to brush your teeth." Why is she worrying about such unimportant matters at a time like this?

I don't argue and head for the bathroom. I turn on the water and .... nothing. The water has been cut off. For some reason, I am

incredibly pleased at this turn of events. Maybe, I think, war won't be so bad.

I tell my mother, and she shrugs. Obviously it wasn't that important to her either.

Dad has gotten dressed and tells us he is going out. "Dad, don't go, why can't you stay home?" I complain. He explains he has to go to his office, take care of some things, and talk to other people. "I won't be long."

I don't know anything about war. What if the war comes to our street or to our house, I wonder, and dad isn't here and we are taken prisoner or sent away somewhere? How will we find each other? How can he leave us...?

My mother senses my anxiety and puts her arm around me. "Don't worry, dad will be back soon...The Germans are still far away, but we need to start packing some things to take along in case we have to leave in a hurry. That could be soon, maybe even in a day or two."

Leave? Where will we go? How? There aren't any answers and I don't know what to imagine. Mom just tells me not to worry.

How can I not worry? Will I be able to say goodbye to my friends? What will I be able to take with me? What will I have to leave behind?

I look at my lily-of-the valley bunch on top to the piano. I'll probably have to leave it. Could it be that the only thing I'll be able to take away from yesterday's field trip will be the recollection of how much fun I had, how happy I was?

I feel lost.

I had no way of knowing then how radically my life would change on that fateful day, May 10, 1940.

Dad came back home and then left several times in the course of the next two days. I worried every time he was away. I wanted to keep him on a string, never out of my sight, and not wonder if he'd ever return. Thankfully, by Sunday, May 12, the final verdict was issued: we are leaving. But how, I wondered. We don't have a car and daddy had said that the trains weren't running. Miraculously, it seemed, Dad had managed to find a local man who had a small bus and who was willing take us to the little seaside town of La Panne, in the farthest NW corner of Belgium, the area known as Flanders. Bompapa, my father's father would come with us.

What to take and what to leave became the drama of the day. We were allowed only the barest minimum and could only include one or two of our dearest possessions. As I write this, I can still remember the confusion and the anxiety, mixed with fear and

excitement that I felt as I tried to chose the things that would accompany me on my mysterious journey toward my unknown future.

And so we are on our way. Surprisingly, there isn't a lot of traffic and we seem to be making fairly good progress. I'm not sure why we are going to La Panne, but I learned later that that was where the Germans were stopped in 1918 when the Belgians opened some dykes and flooded the area, stopping a German onslaught as they were mired in mud. In retrospect, we realize how absurd a move that was more than 20 years later...

Halfway to our destination, our bus is stopped by a group of Belgian soldiers. They order my father off the bus, and tell him he must go with them. Germans were seen parachuting from airplanes in the area and all men traveling were being rounded up as potential suspects. Our bus, they say, must keep going. I am frantic. How can this be! We don't know exactly where we'll be so how can my father ever find us if he is let go. Again, no one tells me anything, and the bus takes off...A thirteen-year-old child today would have been treated very differently than I was, at least given some explanation, offered some reassurance. But I was not accustomed to challenge parental decisions and so, I just went along.

When we got to LaPanne, we encountered many people we knew from Antwerp. Obviously, this was a deliberate rendez-vous that had been decided ahead of time, so I hoped that my father would find us in the little Pension where we unloaded our couple of bags and settled temporarily. To my great joy, dad joined us the next day. I know nothing about what happened or how he found us...I was too happy to care.

The news which came to us through the radio was very bad: the Germans had broken through the magic of the Maginot Line and had crossed into France and Belgium with their tanks and armored vehicles. They were moving fast, creating havoc and causing panic along the way.

We needed to keep moving. After a few days in LaPanne, the plan was to cross into France...on foot. Old Grampa, still wearing his winter coat this balmy May morning, was to walk with us. He was 75, old and fat, and I realized then how I had never liked him...this man who always smelled old and whose pudgy hand I had been expected to kiss whenever he came to our house. We joined this strange parade, thousands of people dragging their meager belongings, trudging on a country road hoping to escape an advancing army. Dad had obtained a little wagon where we loaded

our couple of suitcases and we pulled it along, up and down the hilly roads, on this almost biblical exodus.

During the next few weeks, much history was made. We reached Dunkirk, a mere 10 km. from the Belgian border, and after waiting at the station for a train that never came, we found a place to sleep in the attic of a kind French family. That night, there were violent German air raids, as enemy plane were trying to sink the thousands of small French boat which were ferrying trapped English soldiers across the English Channel, thereby rescuing thousands of them. This was a heroic display of French bravery and dedication by ordinary fishermen at a time of great need. I, in that attic, was very scared and I huddled together with my parents and sister, fervently hoping for the awful noise to stop.

For several days, we walked on a road along the northern coast of France, part of a ribbon of thousands of people just fleeing toward some unknown destination. On one occasion, we had to throw ourselves on the muddy ground when German airplanes dove from the sky to strafe this human line. I don't know whether anyone was hurt, but every noise I heard caused me to panic... And then we had to acknowledge defeat when, on the fourth day of our walk, we were met by a similar line of refugees, dragging their belongings, running away – seemingly toward us – to escape the advancing Germans, they said. We understood then that we were trapped... German soldiers behind us, German soldiers in front of us. There was no exit. Stunned, we returned to the little village where a farmer had given us shelter the night before, and stood by the next day as German soldiers on motorcycles and in hundred of trucks drove by as if they already owned the place.

It was heartbreaking, and many people wept at the sight.

For the next few weeks we were stranded in the village of Condette where we were given a place in the basement of a Villa, which had been abandoned by its owners. Another displaced family lived upstairs. My mother's major task was to cook meals with what little food she and my sister could find, beg or buy. My dad was out talking to people, trying to figure out what we could do, where we could go. I ran around outside, playing with refugee and local kids, not really knowing what would happen next.

Finally, the Germans, who had established a sort of local government in the village ordered that all people who were not permanent residents of Condette needed to go back to their original homes, and thus started our journey back to occupied Antwerp.

Transportation was still very complicated, and it took us several days, traveling by truck, bus and slow train to reach our home, a trip which would have taken three hours in normal times. We were hungry and exhausted by the time we got back to Antwerp, but were extremely fortunate to find that our apartment had not been confiscated by German officers.

After settling back into our apartment, we resumed our lives, seemingly as if we had never left.

A strange sense of false normalcy prevailed over our city.

By September 1, nearly four months after war had erupted, kids were back in school, people went to work, most food was available in stores. If it weren't for the fact that several times a day, in many neighborhoods, groups of German soldiers marched through the street in lock step, singing German marching songs in perfect harmony, we could almost imagine that all was well. The soldiers often carried a rolled up towel under one arm, as they headed to a swimming pool or public showers. I didn't want to like the songs, but I did...

For a while, life seemed almost normal to me, though in reality that was very far from the case. In addition to the Belgian franc, the Deutsche mark became legal tender. German soldiers were constantly shopping and sending all their purchases back home to their families. My father, a diamond broker who worked on commission, had resumed going to work regularly. Occasionally, he would come home worried and dejected, when yet another of his colleagues had been called to appear at the local police station, and usually was not heard from again. Actually, my parents looked worried all the time, but I didn't ask and they didn't tell, and I did my best to stay out of trouble so as not to add to their problems.

Then the order came: Every adult Jew in town had to register and get a number. The definition of a Jew was anyone who had one grandfather who was Jewish. My parents went when their turn came and later told my sister and me that they saw a number of priests in line who said they were proud to declare their Jewish origins. One can assume that priests, who in those days wore long cassocks and special hats, could easily have "passed" and ignored the order since there was no proof of their Jewishness, but they told the people on line with them that it was a matter of pride for them.

This really surprised me since I had experienced anti-semitism on many occasions, when little kids would tell me to go back to where I came from, often calling that place Palestine...I had



no idea where Palestine was and I protested vigorously that I was born tight there just as they were.

Several months went by, but when the days when my father would witness raids where several Jewish people were rounded up and taken away to no one knew where, became increasingly more frequent, he began to take steps that would make it possible for us to leave. I don't know how he discovered that there was a sort of underground which helped people to escape with false documents, and on January 24, my sister's birthday, we were again told to pack. This time we would take two large suitcases, one for my sister and me, one for my parents. For Officialdom, we were going on vacation to Paris, with a forged laissez-passer that was supposed to get us past controls.

And so, again, we said goodbye to Antwerp. And here begins our so-called vacation to Paris.

## ***Nanny Stretches Out***

*We never knew the absolute truth of Nanny's stories.. Everything was based in fact, but there were some gaps. We encouraged her to make up or take a guess at what she didn't remember. It soon developed into actual fiction, where she pretty much made up everything. The real truth didn't matter, as Nanny was speaking her own.*

## **The Wise Rebbe**

When he was nineteen my oldest brother married a girl two years younger than he, the only child of a wine merchant. He wanted to live in a big city, but he had to stay in the little town, as the parents of his young bride did not want her to leave. The town where they lived was very well known because a very famous Rebbe lived there.

Thousands of his worshipers used to come to his court, but few could really penetrate in his domain. Even if they could only get a glimpse of the saintly man, they went home happy and elated. My brother, whose wife was related to the Rebbe, could sometimes be there within his inner circle.

In the wine store owned by his father-in-law, people often gathered to talk about the miracles the Rebbe performed. The town was prospering because of the pilgrims and thriving with its many visitors. This helped also in the relations among the different ethnic groups, which got along better than they did in the neighboring cities. Gentiles and Jews lived in different parts of the town, but their stores were in the marketplace, next to each other.

The Rebbe looked much older than he was. With his white beard and his lordly posture, he was very impressive. One day, my brother told us, a young demented woman was brought to the Rebbe by her parents who implored him to help their daughter as she could not be helped by doctors.

She had lost her first baby and lost her mind from sorrow. The Rebbe told her in a very calm voice that her baby was very happy in heaven, playing with the angels, and that she would have many other beautiful children. Now, she had to go back to her husband and to her duties as a Jewish woman. The young woman listened to the soothing words from of the saintly man and was comforted. She left in good spirits and recovered. The skeptics did

not consider that a miracle, but they did have respect for the old Rebbe's wisdom.

One day, my brother on his way home from a business trip, came to visit, as he often did, and told us that a new miracle had happened in the last weeks.

A merchant, a Gentile, was killed one night in front of his house as he returned from a business trip. He was stabbed and his wallet was stolen. Officials from a neighboring city were called by the local police, and they started an inquiry.

It was established that the killer was not a stranger, for the dogs had not barked on the night when the crime was committed. When the authorities came to the wine store of my brother's father-in-law, they said that they were at a loss; they did not have any clues that would help to find the criminal. My brother suggested they seek the help of the Rebbe. Since the Rebbe was admired by Gentile and Jew alike for his wisdom, and as the town was in a panic and near hysteria, the head of the police agreed to see him.

An interview was set up, and the district attorney and the chief of police went to solicit the advice of the saintly man. The Rebbe had a suggestion, that the murdered man's body should be exposed in the church in an open casket. Every male of the town would pass in a line to say good bye to the deceased and shake his hand. The priest of the parish was consulted and it was decided that the dead man would hold his crucifix in his left hand, leaving his right free for the handshake.

While this was not traditional, it was done as planned. Hundreds upon hundreds marched in line to shake the right hand of the dead man. Everybody was present, or else they would be suspected. It was a solemn march, and it was a horrible experience for some weak souls.

All of the sudden almost by the end of the march, a man started to yell, "NO - no - I shall not shake this cold hand. Let me go. No, no!" And he started to cry desperately. The man was brought to the police station. The young man confessed that he killed his neighbor in order to have money to pay his gambling debts.

The man was sentenced and died on the gallows. The money was found and returned to the widow. The legend of the Rebbe's miracles was reinforced and perpetuated.

Even the skeptics had to admit that although this was not a miracle, the Rebbe was an extraordinary man.

## **The Journey**

After a long life spent in different countries, savoring and enjoying the fruits of different cultures; I am coming back in my memories to my roots. And so, emerges another story that my oldest brother, who was living in a shtetl, told us one day when he was visiting us in the big city.

I was a little girl and I was mesmerized by the story of the famous Rabbi who knew so well how to solve a grave problem that happened in his congregation. And what a problem it was! If known to legal authorities, it would compromise many and would forever ruin the reputation of one man and his family, and bring shame and distress to the community.

It was the winter before the First World War. The life in that little town, which was surrounded by the Tatra Mountains, was peaceful and quiet. An early snow was covering everything that was otherwise drab and not especially pretty, with a glittering mantle.

My brother, who was a wine merchant, planned a journey to Hungary in order to purchase wine for the old count who was living in the ancient mansion on a large estate. His family had lived in this part of Poland for many centuries. The count, who enjoyed travel, had connections in many foreign countries. The class he belonged to--not his ethnics--was the determining factor in his relations. At this time of the year, the count invited his friends to hunt the deer and bears that were abundant in his immense forests. The count gave my brother a big order for Tokay and other red wines that would be consumed in big quantities with the venison by the ever-. thirsty guests.

The champagne for the occasion would come from France where the count used to spend his summers. My brother told us that the count advanced him a lot of money to make the purchase easy and the delivery prompt.

The evening before the journey, a few friends came to wish my brother a good trip. He would be traveling, partly by sled and partly by train. His luggage was ready and his old manservant came to pick it up from his bedroom.

As the journey would have to start very early in the morning, the key of the little safe where my brother. had placed the money was left on the top of the dresser to be handy at the time of departure.

The next day, after his morning prayers and breakfast, my brother opened the safe to get the leather pouch. It was not there. Horrified and in panic, he called his wife to make sure she did not

hide it somewhere else. It was gone! It was stolen, but by whom? My brother could not alert the police. He ran to the Rabbi who was known as a man with a vision and wisdom that made him famous : far and near. The Rabbi tried to calm his hysteria and asked questions:

"The old servant?"

"No," said my brother; "he is a good man devoted to God and his family."

"Any other suspects?"

"How can I accuse my friends?" my brother answered.

"Do you know of some problems they have? Tell me. I have to know."

"Yes, perhaps," said, my brother. "One of my friends has a beautiful wife he adores. She is not happy to have to live in our town where she feels out of place and she wants to leave her husband unless they move to a big city.

The Rabbi listened and told his servant to call the congregation to attend--all of them--the evening services in the synagogue. My brother's trip was, of course, postponed since he was left without the money.

After the evening prayers the old Rabbi stood up and said: "One of you committed a terrible sin! He stole from a friend who trusted him. I do not know who it is, it does not matter. But I am putting the thief in a Cherem!" (the Hebrew word for excommunication.)

"The man will be punished by God! All his plans and projects will not be successful. He better repent and give back what does not belong to him. His crime, if not repented, will ruin a man's life and bring disaster and shame to the community since the authorities will have to be informed tomorrow, and will surely start investigations."

The people listened in awe. They dispersed in silence, frightened and wondering. My brother, crushed by his misfortune did not sleep all night. Snow was falling covering the silent town. The night was almost gone when he heard a sound. He waited, praying and hoping. When he opened the door he saw the shadow of a man, running. He saw the leather pouch lying in the snow.

God in his mercy was helping with the falling snow to cover the footsteps of the repenting man. My brother was saved from shame and disaster by the wisdom of the old Rabbi. He started the journey the same day.

## Rivers

I am never tired of the view I see from my window. I can see the Hudson River, beautiful and placid even on windy days. I see little sailing boats that look like toys, gliding on the blue waters and disappearing after a while. On late afternoons the setting sun colors the river in the woods on the opposite shore in different shades of pink and red with breathtaking beauty.

Today, another river from long ago came into my mind. It is the river of this stool that surrounds the walls of the medieval city of Kraków where I was born. From the window of our house in a suburban, we could see sometimes the ships the River carried to the Baltic Sea. On Sundays and holidays we could hear the Viennese waltz is played by an orchestra on the banks of the river. It was fun to be entertained by an invisible band.

It was before the first world war, everybody seemed to be happy. Until one some afternoon I am little, and I tried to understand why everybody looks so scared. I want to see what they see out of the close windows. I climb on the chair. My sister is grown up holds me back. I struggle and finally I am allowed to look out.

The house is shaking, the sound of the roaring wins is frightening. The river fed by rains that were falling in a downpour day and night is raging and overflowing throughout the city. The lower prop parts of Kraków are already underwater. Men in canoes are trying to evacuate inhabitants who are in danger as our houses built on the hill we are safe.

We can see the story river flooding one street after another. No land is visible anymore, the world has disappeared underwater.

Don't cry the baby is safe with his mother. Can you see the man and the canoes. They are going everywhere to save people and bring them to the addicts I'm sure the baby is safe. I dried my tears but did not really believe my mother story.

There're long days of extreme danger. The beautiful river that was usually blew in the summer rezoning with laughter and the pranks and frogs of bathers was now on monster menacing to engulf the city. Or so I thought.

Our store which was situated on the Main Street and had contained beautiful fabrics laces and trimmings was totally destroyed. The merchandise was swept out by the raging waters. The wooden shelves and the furniture were broken in pieces. When my sister took me there I saw my mother in tears.

Soon after the disaster my brothers who have been in charge of the business for many years left for Belgium. They were going to learn the diamond trade from other members of our family you have established themselves they're long ago.

With the devastating flood, one chapter of our life was closed as we became much poorer than we were before.

A legend was born in describing in songs hero it rescues of lost and found children, and telling a vanish families and fortunes.

I did not like to be reminded of the angry river that made my mother cry and my brothers leave, and that carried a baby's cradle.

When my reverie about the river of my childhood ended, I noticed that the sun and the beautiful colors had disappeared. I was falling. A Taurus but with glittering lights was passing by, on its way to circling the island. Somebody there was playing a lovely tune on a flute. How beautiful and peaceful with my river on that summer night.

### **Love, Eternal Love**

"The boat will be leaving in two hours and I still have so much to do."

She was standing next to the windows not listening.

"What about the books, the records? I do not want them."

"All right, I will call a friend to pick them up." He looked at her, she was trying to smile.

"Darling, do understand, I see you are still disturbed. You know I could not ignore this offer, a chance in a life-. time, an opportunity to realize my dreams of travel to far countries, of working on this interesting assignment, to see the world. Please, I do love you, I will always cherish...".

Words, words, she did not listen, she was in agony, hurt to the extreme.

"I will write of course, you will answer all my questions, will you?"

"When you write, if you write."

The trunk was ready. He called the janitor to take it away. He took her in his arms, kissed her hair, her eyes, "Good-bye, my darling, I do love you, I shall never..."

Words, words, love, love. An echo resounded a long time, after he left through the door. Would she ever be able to open that door again to face the world outside? To live as before? Would she

ever want to listen to anybody talking about her beauty, her charm, about love, eternal love? Would she? The room became so huge after he left, after he was gone.

She looked around. Maybe she would feel better, if she would smash to pieces all the beautiful things they bought and enjoyed together over the years? "Maybe I should crush every thing under my feet, just as I was demolished and crushed? Maybe, I should howl like the wounded animal that I am?" She threw herself on the couch and was sobbing desperately.

In the street below the open window, children were playing, laughter was heard as the sun was setting in glorious colors; the room was even more beautiful, bathed in purple and rose. She hated the room, the world, herself.

The phone rang. She did not move. Suddenly she stood up. Maybe he ...She picked up the receiver.

"Yes? Who? The friend? The books, the records? I know, not today please, maybe another time, no, not today." Then she listened.

"All right in an hour." She started to dress, which one? Whatever; I do not care."

The friend came, tall, handsome. He did not mention his friend, the journey that took him away for long years to come. He did not want to take the records, the books, not: at this time, another time. He said, "Let's go out, I know of a place, a discotheque, very pleasant, please, it will be fun."

He opened the door for her. They left.





## *Charlie Cleans Out the Garage*

This iteration of *Yesterday and Today* emerged from a set of plastic cartons long stored in our garage, the equivalent of giant Tupperware containers that includes sixty years of family history.

These items traveled from one box to another. Along the way, some were tossed and others kept, judged only by a quick glance and a spot decision: “Yes, I’m going to want that some day.”

None of the items are self explanatory. There are pictures with no names or dates on the back. Documents certifying a moment, with no clue as to what happened before or since. There are letters from one person to another, offering one side of a long running conversation.

I can guess the identities and the context, but there is no one to call in order to fill in the missing information. I can identify about three quarters of what’s in there in some way. Perhaps my sister or cousins could fill in a few blanks, but it would be incomprehensible to anyone else.

It begins in the late 1920s, with travel documents for my mother’s family. A Polish passport for my grandparents, with Nanny’s photo half the size of her husband’s likeness. There are documents concerning Nanny’s work as a diamond broker, as well as drawings, pictures and report cards from my childhood. Farther along, there is an official letter from the Diamond Dealer’s Club ratifying the acceptance of women as members and establishing Nanny’s status. (The letter is dated 1979, even though she had worked at the club since her husband’s death in 1950).

After something passes through my hands enough times the mantra changes from “I might want this some day” to “This is so old I can’t possibly throw it out.”

The contents of these boxes come from different sources but ended up in the same place. Throughout the years I would add and subtract items, knowing that it would be the source for the family project that I would eventually undertake.

I’ve stared at this stuff for years, but cracked it open in earnest in June 2019.

I found Nanny’s stories, not only packaged as pass around publications but in their original form: Handwritten, or typed (presumably) by a friend or acquaintance. There was a folder of publisher responses, commonly known as “rejection slips,” as well as others best characterized as fan letters.

There was a folder full of yellowed travel documents from the family's trip to America, which I set aside. Aside from being in another language or two, they were incomplete and did not add anything to the story I sought to write.

They were so old I couldn't possibly throw them out, even knowing they would crumble away once I was no longer there to protect them.

There were letters to my mother from women with names like Ruth, Ramona, Harriet and Eileen. Each missive brought Mom up to date with their family happenings in some detail. There were letters from men that my mother didn't marry, all from the 1940s. Throughout, these letters represent just one side of the conversation so we can only guess what happened next.

There were several items that added to my own story, in the same incomplete way. Today, any moderately literate twelve year old could set up an Amazon account and publish a book of their own fancy. But self publishing has always been around, for kids. On a boring winter day in 1965 you might say "hey, I'm going to write a book about The Beatles," combining awestruck prose with pictures from a teen magazine. You'd show it to a few friends and move on to the next thing, but your mom would keep it in a drawer. It would transfer from the drawer to a box, and then another before becoming too old to throw out.

The two surviving volumes paint an accurate yet incomplete picture of my seventh-grade mind.

First, the hair collection. Held in a battered blue vinyl notebook now with a long vertical tear one inch from the bottom, it held fifteen pages of typing paper each containing three to five single hair strands taped next to the signature of the person where it originated. I did this for about two weeks not sure where it would end up but stopped after the idea met with excessive ridicule. Even so, I managed to collect hair from 75 people.

At the time, early 1967, hair length was a symbol of an emerging cultural shift. But I didn't seek to capture a cultural flashpoint. Rather it was to meet people. Girls, specifically. It gave me an excuse to talk to them. It was also a way for me to strike up conversations with some of the cool upperclassmen. The ones with hair.

While asking for someone's hair broke the ice, it was hard to move on from there. I thought that a girl would be flattered that I'd ask for a strand of her hair, but it had the opposite effect. The request "can I have a piece of your hair" never led to "can I take you to the Battle of the Bands?"

I wanted them to think I was cool but instead left them with the impression that I was a stupid kid. Perhaps I knew the whole idea was stupid. Looking at the names today it's clear that my best friends and the girls I had the biggest crushes on were not included. Apparently, I avoided those I liked and respected the most, concentrating on people I didn't really know. If they thought it was dumb it wouldn't matter so much.

If one project fails it's best to jump right into another. It didn't take too long for me to come up with "Pink Elephants and other obscenities," mostly because many of the ideas were basically stolen from John Lennon.

Lennon, who many remember as a member of the Beatles, had published two books of absurdist poetry, "In His Own Right" and "A Spaniard in the Works." I read and owned both books but never really understood them—beyond the fact that I knew they were cool.

"Pink Elephants" resembles many artifacts that people save but never read. I have pages of journals written during crisis times of my youth, and an envelope full of letters written to my parents but returned to me after their deaths. I can only scan a few lines at a time as they amplify my insecurities and mistakes. Watching my efforts to justify careless action to my parents and imagining their response doesn't move anything along.

Today I forced myself to read "Pink Elephants" cover to cover, gaining insights to the project and my former self. Or perhaps my current self.

It's twenty pages cut to booklet size and stapled together. It is all typed, complete with strike overs and accompanied by scratchy drawings. They were obvious stream of consciousness first drafts with no revision involved. I wanted to finish the project because it was time, not because it was done.

Here's the title poem, which seemed a little more thought out than the others. It is presented in lower case, showing that I was at least aware of e.e. cummings:

pink elephants here  
pink elephants there  
pink elephants everywhere  
the chair you see before your eyes  
could be a pink elephant in disguise

you see them in cereal

you see them in drinks  
you see them in chains  
between the links

My copping John Lennon's ideas was embarrassing, even then. One of his poems talks about a budgie, whatever that was. My version rhymed budgie with fudgie, mudgie and grudge.

Even so, there were a few lines that qualified as clever:

mary had a little lamb  
on it fleas would ride  
and everywhere that Mary went  
she took insecticide

A lot of the poems and stories are crazy and abstract, reflecting a very short attention span and a tendency toward marijuana-based thinking. Which is to say, I was thinking about when I'd get to smoke marijuana.

There may have been a few other copies, although I would have needed to type them individually. I showed them around school, but to the teachers. The kids just wouldn't get it. It gained me some notoriety. The book was "published" in February, and in June the chairman of the English department signed my yearbook calling me "the school's Pink Elephant poet." That gave me a great boost, amid all of the "best wishes for the future" bullshit that all the other teachers and students inscribed.

This summer a group of former classmates posted a Facebook note about a "Medicare Mixer," scheduled for the end of September at a local open-air gastropub. There had been a similar reunion in the same bar seven years ago which I had regretted missing.

It was about this time when I was looking at the hair collection through an "I can't throw this away because it's too old" filter. This was a repeat of my previous interactions with the item, only this time I really wanted to get it out of the house. It was unsettling, how I'd captured these parts of people whom I could no longer recollect.

I thought of going to the reunion book in hand, but decided that would increase the derision it drew the first time. I thought of mailing it anonymously to the bar on the day of the event, or to one of the organizers. Deciding that anonymity is for cowards I sent a Facebook message to one of the organizers to determine her interest, a message she ignored.

A month or so before it was to happen I decided to skip the event entirely. The hair collection was interesting, but it could go either way. While I had the money, it was clear that flying cross country to see people I hadn't bothered to keep up with in the first place would be a colossal waste.

It was a good call. The day before the event it was moved from the sunny gastropub to a dark bar adjacent to the school. Facebook posts the next day showed several seniors looking much the same as the people in my current home town, although they were having a lot less fun.

The pictures weren't tagged, so I wrote a request for the organizers to do so. They added the names, asking me if I'd been there. They hadn't seen or recognized me. It was then I saw an alternate timeline, where I travelled to the event book in hand, took one look and decided to sit in the corner and watch. Anonymity is still for cowards, but I wouldn't want to admit that I'd travelled 3,000 miles to hang with people I didn't like in the first place.

"Yeah, I was there," I lied in a responding post. "But I had to leave. I didn't recognize anybody"

The notebook went back into the box, where it will face destruction the next time it passes through my hands. Chances are, it will outlast me.

These publications, the hair collection and the poetry book, have no monetary value. The poetry is derivative and the hair collection lacks historical context and no celebrity involvement. None of the people involved made records or committed crimes.

Their value is ephemeral.

People seek rare items from the 1960s like buttons, posters, magazines and records, objects that recall those times. Only a few thousand of them were made in the first place, and even fewer survive, adding to their rarity and value.

My own adorably amateurish publication efforts are the rarest of all objects. There is only one that ever existed, pretty much in the same shape as when it was created. It speaks about the times, although subtitles are needed for it to be publicly understood.

While people save photographs, newspaper clippings and small totems, most of them are mass produced in some way and also reside in someone else's box. To attain collectible status something must have value to more than one person.

But every box has at least one unique object, something we created that evokes the times but does not meet professional

standards of art or value. It is these objects that make the cut, time and again. A unique object at the bottom of a box has no monetary value, but it is these objects that will speak the loudest once you are gone (even if no one hears these voices from the bottom of a landfill).

As this project is finished the boxes will return to the garage, although with a finished copy of this book included. Few people will read this book (let me know if you've made it this far) and fewer people will ever open the box.

When they do, they'll find this volume at the top of the pile to serve as a guide. At that time it will make a lot more sense. All of us will be gone, and we'll know if It happened again, and how many times.

This is a work in progress, a sketchy draft of the full story of Bronia Maringer, her journey through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and her impact on her family.

This is what is best described as a small printing— Thirty numbered copies to be stingily distributed to specific people. As if I stitched together twenty leather pouches or cans of hot pepper jelly and passed it around to some friends for the holidays. If you have scored a copy you are most likely a friend, relative or acquaintance of the family. Many of you may have memories of Nanny that will fill in the blanks, or pictures and anecdotes that illustrate her story. In this case, please send along any contributions or comments to **cybermant@gmail.com**.

After years of cogitation I assembled this volume in spurts between April and December 2019. There is so much more to tell, to expand the narrative and place these stories into today's context.

This isn't the whole story, but will have to do for now.

Charlie Bermant  
December 2019

**Copy \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_**

## **YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

STORIES BY BRONIA MARINGER WITH NARRATION BY  
CHARLIE BERMANT AND CONTRIBUTIONS FROM LILIAN  
MARINGER BERMANT AND JULIE BERMANT

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